

INSS Insight No. 1351, July 22, 2020

Tightrope over the Tigris: Iraqi Prime Minister Reins in Iran-Backed Militias

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Initial steps taken by the new Prime Minister of Iraq, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, indicate that he intends to restrain the elements that weaken and destabilize the country, among them the militias supported by Iran. These measures join other developments challenging the active presence of Iran and its proxies in Iraq: from demonstrations that refuse to die out, and have instead escalated following their violent suppression, to the killing of Soleimani, to Iran's inability to persuade the political factions in the Iraqi parliament to support a pro-Iranian candidate for prime minister. The question of Iran's involvement is scheduled to head the agenda in the strategic dialogue now underway between Iraq and the United States. Kadhimi's success in restraining the activity of the Shiite militias and the results of the dialogue with the United States will have a direct effect on Israel's interests, especially if Iraq and the US administration agree that the redeployment of the US forces in Iraq will be accompanied by Iraqi commitments to implement measures aimed at increasing government control over the borders and preventing cross-border terrorist activity.

After years of diminishing Iraqi ability to enforce its sovereignty over armed organizations operating in its territory, especially the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) supported by Iran, potential for change has emerged in recent months. Mustafa al-Kadhimi, former director of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (the Iraqi equivalent of the Israel Security Agency), was appointed Prime Minister of Iraq in April 2020, and promised to undertake reforms to strengthen the state's governance, especially in law enforcement. As part of the replacement of personnel in the Iraqi security agencies and Ministry of Defense following his taking office, several senior officials believed to be responsible for the violent suppression of the mass demonstrations that began in October 2019 in response to Iraq's deteriorating economic situation and in protest against government corruption and Iranian penetration of the country were replaced. In recent days, the Iraqi media have reported the dismissal of Falah al-Fayyad, head and advisor of the Iraq National Security Council, known for his close ties to the Iranian regime and chairman (administrative manager) of the PMF.

In a series of public announcements after taking office, al-Kadhimi unveiled his security vision – the restoration of the Baghdad central government's exclusive right to bear and use arms in the country (i.e., a monopoly on the use of force) and the elimination of the current “state of gangs,” in which Iraq has multiple authorities – a multitude of armed organizations operating in addition to the state security organs while refusing to obey the government. This is an ambitious vision that previous prime ministers failed to achieve, and it is highly doubtful whether al-Kadhimi will be able to realize it in the near future. Inter alia, parliamentary elections are scheduled in Iraq next year, and it is questionable whether the Prime Minister will continue in his post. Initial measures have already heightened the tension between him and the militias loyal to their Iranian patron.

The visit to Baghdad by senior Iranian leaders Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani and Revolutionary Guards Brigadier General Esmail Qaani in the months following the killing of Soleimani by the United States, and their involvement in the negotiations preceding the formation of al-Kadhimi's government, highlighted the great importance attributed by the Iranian regime to promotion of its allies in the Iraqi ruling elite. Shamkhani and Qaani, who was appointed commander of the Quds force in place of Soleimani, attempted to improve the chances of other candidates considered more loyal to Tehran. Iran is also continuing to support the Shiite militias with money and equipment.

On the other hand, even following al-Kadhimi's appointment, and even though he has demonstrated greater independence than his predecessors, supporting the PMF militias is important for the Iranian regime. Support for several of these militias enables Iran to bypass the Prime Minister's Office and continue using Iraq as a sphere of influence and base for military activity and messages and threats in the context of its regional conflict with the United States. For example, the militias have fired rockets against US military forces and diplomatic staff in Iraq, and Iran continues to use Iraq as a land route for sending Shiite militia operatives to Syria.

Given the ongoing Iranian involvement, al-Kadhimi's first goal is to rein in the activity of the Shiite militias, with an emphasis on Kata'ib Hezbollah (the Hezbollah brigades), as an instrument of terrorism against the American forces in Iraq. Even after al-Kadhimi assumed office as Prime Minister, and despite his warnings, rocket barrages at the compound in Baghdad housing the United States embassy continued. In late June, in an operation widely covered by the media, several Kata'ib Hezbollah operatives were arrested by Iraqi anti-terrorism forces, apparently in the wake of intelligence information received from the Americans about the preparation of rocket barrages aimed at the embassy compound. Most of those arrested were released after a few days, following protests in Baghdad by militia members and threatening messages on the social networks, including death threats against the Prime Minister himself. This, however, did not end the tension. In early July, a

commentator on security affairs who supported restraining Iranian involvement in Iraq was murdered in Baghdad. Immediate suspicion fell on Kata'ib Hezbollah. A few days later, the media reported an attack on a convoy carrying equipment to the American forces in southern Iraq.

It is too early to say whether al-Kadhimi and the security agencies under his command are planning a confrontation with the pro-Iranian militias, which is liable to escalate because of the determination by each side to establish facts on the ground. It is likely that as far as the Iraqi prime minister is concerned, this is not a zero-sum game; it is mainly an attempt to set red lines for the militias and allow them to continue operating under the government's restrictions. Already in his visit to the PMF headquarters in May, al-Kadhimi emphasized that he expected to cooperate with the militias, but under materially different conditions than those prevailing before he assumed office. The militias will be able to maintain their organization framework and work in tandem with the state security agencies in the performance of common tasks, with an emphasis on combating Islamic State terrorist cells.

Neither Iran nor the Shiite militias have any interest in a military confrontation that is liable to worsen the internal situation in Iraq. On the other hand, the militias will continue to focus on their ability to preserve their interests and power bases. Iran, which supported al-Kadhimi's appointment even though he was not its first choice, also has no interest in further escalation, and is therefore refraining from criticism of his measures. For Iran, preserving its interests, which include the extension of its economic and social influence in Iraq in addition to the militias' freedom of action, is its top priority. This holds even at the cost of some compromise on the freedom of action for the groups it supports, and especially in view of Iraq's efforts to expand cooperation with its Arab neighbors, among them the agreement reached between Iraq, the United States, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to connect Iraq to the GCC electrical grid.

The goal to strengthen Iraqi sovereignty is also driving al-Kadhimi in the strategic dialogue currently underway with the United States. He seeks to revise the foundations for relations between the two countries; as such, he intends to take into account both the American demand to reduce Iranian influence in Iraq and reinforce the government's authority over the militias, and to establish rules and a timetable for the withdrawal of American forces, or at least some of them, from Iraq. In Iraq itself, the internal discourse about the future of the American presence in the country continues. Many political groups are calling to accelerate the withdrawal of American forces. The parliament in Baghdad passed a non-binding resolution calling on the government to demand the withdrawal of the American forces.

This consistent aim to apply sovereignty to all areas of the country was also recently reflected in the position of the al-Kadhimi government to the Kurdish Peshmerga militias in northern Iraq. In early July, a dialogue was launched between the Iraqi government and representatives of the Kurdish militias in order to increase coordination and cooperation, and to fill the security vacuum in parts of the Kurdish area ("the disputed areas"). From the government's point of view, this will reinforce the common effort to eliminate Islamic State cells and the presence of the state's security forces in this part of the country, thereby reducing and the sphere of influence of Iran and the militias under its control.

For now, the struggle to bring about the desired change is focusing on the center of political power – Baghdad – while at the same time, a change has also begun at Iraq's border crossings. In late June, the arrival of a force from the anti-terrorism unit at the border with Syria in the al-Qa'im area was reported, although there is still intensive activity by the pro-Iranian militias at the border crossings. As a rule, in Iraq's border areas (especially in the Anbar Governate, part of which is on the Syrian border), the state exerts very limited control. There is consequently great potential for dealing with one of the Iraqi state's fundamental problems: the difficulty in controlling its borders.

Al-Kadhimi's success in reining in the activity of the Shiite militias and the results of the dialogue between Iraq and the United States will have a direct effect on Israel's interests, especially if it is agreed in the strategic dialogue that Iraq will commit to increase its control over its borders and thwart cross-border terrorist activity.